

BY: SHAHZADI ZENAB CHAUDRY

Earth day

Every year on April 22, Earth Day marks the anniversary of the birth of the modern environmental movement in 1970.

As we prepare to mark 50 years of Earth Day in 2020, let's take a look at the last half-century of mobilization for action:

Earth Day 1970 gave a voice to an emerging public consciousness about the state of our planet –

In the decades leading up to the first Earth Day, Americans were consuming vast amounts of leaded gas through massive and inefficient automobiles. Industry belched out smoke and sludge with little fear of the consequences from either the law or bad press. Air pollution was commonly accepted as the smell of prosperity. Until this point, mainstream America remained largely oblivious to environmental concerns and how a polluted environment threatens human health.

However, the stage was set for change with the publication of Rachel Carson's New York Times bestseller *Silent Spring* in 1962. The book represented a watershed moment, selling more than 500,000 copies in 24 countries as it raised public awareness and concern for living organisms, the environment and the inextricable links between pollution and public health.

Earth Day 1970 would come to provide a voice to this emerging environmental consciousness, and putting environmental concerns on the front page.

Senator Gaylord Nelson, a junior senator from Wisconsin, had long been concerned about the deteriorating environment in the United States. Then in January 1969, he and many others witnessed the ravages of a massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, California. Inspired by the student anti-war movement, Senator Nelson wanted to infuse the energy of student anti-war protests with an emerging public consciousness about air and water pollution. Senator Nelson announced the idea for a teach-in on college campuses to the national media, and persuaded Pete McCloskey, a conservation-minded Republican Congressman, to serve as his co-chair. They recruited Denis Hayes, a young activist, to organize the campus teach-ins and they choose April 22, a weekday falling between Spring Break and Final Exams, to maximize the greatest student participation.

Recognizing its potential to inspire *all Americans*, Hayes built a national staff of 85 to promote events across the land and the effort soon broadened to include a wide range of organizations, faith groups, and others. They changed the name to Earth Day, which immediately sparked national media attention, and caught on across the country. Earth

Day inspired 20 million Americans – at the time, 10% of the total population of the United States – to take to the streets, parks and auditoriums to demonstrate against the impacts of 150 years of industrial development which had left a growing legacy of serious human health impacts. Thousands of colleges and universities organized protests against the deterioration of the environment and there were massive coast-to-coast rallies in cities, towns, and communities.

Groups that had been fighting individually against oil spills, polluting factories and power plants, raw sewage, toxic dumps, pesticides, freeways, the loss of wilderness and the extinction of wildlife united on Earth Day around these shared common values. Earth Day 1970 achieved a rare political alignment, enlisting support from Republicans and Democrats, rich and poor, urban dwellers and farmers, business and labor leaders. By the end of 1970, the first Earth Day led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of other first of their kind environmental laws, including the National Environmental Education Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and the Clean Air Act. Two years later Congress passed the Clean Water Act. A year after that, Congress passed the Endangered Species Act and soon after the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act. These laws have protected millions of men, women and children from disease and death and have protected hundreds of species from extinction.

As 1990 approached, a group of environmental leaders approached Denis Hayes to once again organize another major campaign for the planet. This time, Earth Day went global, mobilizing 200 million people in 141 countries and lifting environmental issues onto the world stage. Earth Day 1990 gave a huge boost to recycling efforts worldwide and helped pave the way for the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. It also prompted President Bill Clinton to award Senator Nelson the Presidential Medal of Freedom – the highest honor given to civilians in the United States – for his role as Earth Day founder.

As the millennium approached, Hayes agreed to spearhead another campaign, this time focused on global warming and a push for clean energy. With 5,000 environmental groups in a record 184 countries reaching out to hundreds of millions of people, Earth Day 2000 built both global and local conversations, leveraging the power of the Internet to organize activists around the world, while also featuring a drum chain that traveled from village to village in Gabon, Africa. Hundreds of thousands of people also gathered on the National Mall in Washington, DC for a First Amendment Rally.

30 years on, Earth Day 2000 sent world leaders a loud and clear message: Citizens around the world wanted quick and decisive action on global warming and clean energy.

As in 1970, Earth Day 2010 came at a time of great challenge for the environmental community to combat the cynicism of climate change deniers, well-funded oil lobbyists, reticent politicians, a disinterested public, and a divided environmental community with the collective power of global environmental activism. Earth Day engages more than 1

billion people every year and has become a major stepping stone along the pathway of engagement around the protection of the planet.

Today, Earth Day is widely recognized as the largest secular observance in the world, marked by more than a billion people every year as a day of action to change human behavior and create global, national and local policy changes.

Now, the fight for a clean environment continues with increasing urgency, as the ravages of climate change become more and more apparent every day.

As the awareness of our climate crisis grows, so does civil society mobilization, which is reaching a fever pitch across the globe today. Disillusioned by the low level of ambition following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015 and frustrated with international environmental lethargy, citizens of the world are rising up to demand far greater action for our planet and its people.

The social and cultural environments we saw in 1970 are rising up again today – a fresh and frustrated generation of young people are refusing to settle for platitudes, instead taking to the streets by the millions to demand a new way forward. Digital and social media are bringing these conversations, protests, strikes and mobilizations to a global audience, uniting a concerned citizenry as never before and catalyzing generations to join together to take on the greatest challenge that humankind has faced.

